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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

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LINCOLN IN INDIANA

(A talk delivered by Hilbert Bennett before the Boonville Kiwanis Club at Boonville, Indiana, May 3, 1949)

I am especially pleased and I feel highly honored to have the privilege of talking to a Boonville audience on Lincoln in Indiana.

I am not a Lincoln scholar. I know very little of the details of Lincoln History. Whatever I may say will have been gleaned from the writings of Wm. E. Barton, Ida M. Tarbell, Bess V. Ehrman, Dr. Louis A. Warren, Dr. J. E. Murr, C. G. Vanness, your own Wm. Fortune and others

I am especially pleased to talk to the best citizens that your community affords, as is always the case with a Kiwanis Club.

Again I am especially pleased to talk to citizens of this community on "Lincoln in Indiana", because this community is the only community that maintains an organization that annually honors our great President and his sainted mother on the anniversary of his birth. His birthday is on the 12th of February, hers is on the 4th. We may well be commemorating and honoring both.

As a rule I am in attendance at those ceremonies, but this year I was out of the State and I could not attend.

That annual recognition in itself deserves the commendation of all who are interested in the commemoration of the great man and his unusual mother. I hope that that practice may long continue and if you cease to continue to practice the good work, I hope that some other organization in this section of our State will carry on.

Thousands and thousands of pages have been written about Abraham Lincoln. His life has been discussed from every angle, his birth, his ancestry, his parents, his schooling, his education, his religion, his political success, his death, in fact all phases of his life have been discussed. Many points on which we can all agree and many controversial points have been discussed.

Dr. Louis A. Warren, the greatest current authority on Lincoln history, says that Abraham Lincoln is the most-writteh-about public figure in all history.

Dr. Warren further says, "I do not know of any other figure in humankind, except Biblical characters, important enough to claim the exclusive attention of so many scholars."

Dr. H. G. Wells, the British Historian, placed six men as the six immortals of the world civilization. One of them was Abraham Lincoln, the others were Jesus, the founder of Christianity; Buddha, the founder of Budahism; Aristotle, the Greek Philosopher; Asoka, an Indian Monarch and Roger Bacon, the British Philosopher.

We know that when a distinguished, disinterested foreigner of the caliber of H. G. Wells places Lincoln among the few really great immortals of all time, we are very safe in assuming that he really was a man of unusual importance in the affairs of mankind, and especially in the affairs of this great Republic.

The Lincoln family moved from Kentucky to Indiana in 1816. The family consisted of Thomas Lincoln, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, his wife, Sarah Lincoln, a daughter, age 9 and Abraham Lincoln, a son, age 7.

Mrs. Lincoln died in 1818. Thomas Lincoln married Sarah Bush Johnson in 1819. Sarah Lincoln Grigsby died in 1828, the same year that Abraham made his first flat boat trip to New Orleans from Rockport.

The Lincoln family moved from Spencer County to Illinois in 1830.

Much has been written af Lincoln that is false, misleading and really damaging to the history of Indiana. Those errors have directed so many minds falsely. The impressions have been rather common and wide spread. It is unfortunate for young people to get those false stories. It is being overcome. Recognition of those discrepancies became so evident that "The Lincoln Inquiry", was inaugurated. Proper and thorough investigation was made by "The Lincoln Inquiry". "The Lincoln Inquiry" was supported by the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, which was very active a number of years ago. In fact it practically constituted the "The Lincoln Inquiry."

Some of the prominent members who gave time and energy to the investigation of the life of Lincoln in Indiana as based on substantiated facts were Judge John E. Iglehart, Judge Roscoe Kiper, Bess V. Ehrman, Wm. Fortune and many others. They made a determined and thorough effort and I think a very successful effort to clear up a lot of false impressions. They have filled a substantial gap in the history of Abraham Lincoln in Indiana. What they found and what they have written for the following generations is reliable and dependable.

I want to relate a rather personal story that is directly related to this speaker and his wife.

When we were first married Uncle Wes Hall, who was a great uncle to my wife, came to visit us a number of times. He would stay for three or four days. We were as poor as Job's turkey. We had our minds on trying to get a little ahead in the world for a rainy day. We did not give enough attention to Uncle Wes. Uncle Wes would talk Lincoln from the time he came until he would leave. The Halls were neighbors and friends of the Lincolns. The two families belonged to the Old Pigeon Baptist Church. They visited in each others homes.

Uncle Wes was considerably younger than Abe, but he was very large to his age and he liked Lincoln and sought to be with him quite a lot. Thomas Lincoln and his son Abe worked for Shadrick Hall, Uncle Wes's father, who ran a tan yard near Santa Claus.

One day Uncle Wes's father put him on a horse with a sack of shelled corn and sent him over to near what is now Gentryville to mill. The road went past the Lincoln Home. Uncle Wes had to wait his turn at the mill. His turn did not come until late that day. When he started home a severe snow storm broke, and as he was nearing the Lincoln Home, Thomas Lincoln went out and stopped him and prevailed on him to stay over night. Thomas thought it too bad for a boy of his age to risk the flurry of the storm on the trip home.

Abe came out of the house bare-footed, walking on the heel of one foot. He had cut his foot with an ax, that day. Thomas took the bag of meal from the horse and the boy alighted. Abe took the bag of meal into the house, Wes following him. Thomas put the horse in the stable. When the boys took the meal into the house, Mrs. Lincoln opened the sack and took some meal from it to make corn bread for supper. Whether that was a custom or whether they had no meal of their own, I do not know. Mrs. Lincoln, Abe and Wes went to the smoke house to get some bacon. It was dark. Abe carried a light. It consisted of a hollowed out turnip with grease in it and a twisted wick. They got the meat and before long they had supper, consisting of roast potatoes, corn bread and bacon. After supper Abe read to Wes from the life of Benjamin Franklin. In the course of time they climbed into the loft via. of a wooden pegs set in the log wall and went to bed. They slept together. The next morning Thomas Lincoln put Uncle Wes and his bag of meal on the horse and started him on his way homeward.

Where we made the mistake in Uncle Wes's visits, was that we did not write those stories down and have Uncle Wes sign and swear to them. His mind was clear as a bell, active and alert. Then they would have been authentic. The same story is told in "Lincoln and his Neighbors", and in one of J. E. Murr's writings. I do not remember many of his stories.

Because Lincoln did not attend school or go to college or have the advantages of boys of families of more favorable circumstances, it was made to appear that he had no education. Lincoln was one of the best educated and highly polished men along his line of his day. Where did he get it? Right here in Indiana. How?

First of all Lincoln was endowed with a superior intellect. He had a wonderfully fine disposition. He seemingly inherited some of the gentleness and loving kindness from his mother, who is reported

as having been very well educated for that time. She was vivacious, beautiful, industrious, cheerful, competent. She was skilled in the handicrafts, spinning, weaving and all of the household arts of her day. She had an unusually pleasant disposition and temperment. He had close companionship with her for nine years. She taught him lessons of obedience, honesty, truthfulness, companionship, faith in her and faith in God.

She was a Christian mother who was the very soul of sweetness, love and affection; a mother whose undying devotion had deeply impressed a sympathetic child's soul with deepest love. Such impressions will endure throughout his life. Tradition has it that that mother realized that she must die. She called her children to her bedside. She breathed the most loving advice and appraisal of the future to those ever affected children. She told them that she was going on a long journey. That she would not return. She asked them to be kind and good to each other and to help one another, to be good to their father and to their friends and neighbors; to always do the things that were good; to do the things that would make themselves and others happier and better and eventually to meet her in Heaven.

Such real experiences to a soul so receptive to emotions were so soul stirring and so impressive that the open mind and soul of that naturally obedient child could never forget it and he could not help being permanently impressed by such wholesome and motherly advice. Such an amazing death scene! Think of children listening to the angel voice of a saintly mother, breathing the very depth of her soul of love and affection into the lives of receptive children. Though they were young, their wounded souls responded deeply to that motherly love and advice.

Though Lincoln was but a child of nine the experience impressed itself so indelibly on his delicate soul that it, no doubt, influenced his entire life. He so stated in his later life when he said, "All

that I am and all that I ever hope to be, I owe to my angel mother".

Then came into his life, his step mother, a second mother, whom he loved dearly. She said in later life that Abe had never given her any trouble; that he was the best boy she ever knew. There was a wonderful companionship between them. She aided him in whatever way she could in his educational efforts.

The possibilities of success were in him. He had to develop them. He did. He could not go to college. He could not take a correspondence course. He could not attend night school. He had an insatiable desire for knowledge. He really craved knowledge of any and all kinds. He read the books in the family library, consisting of the Bible, Aesop's Fables and Pilgrim's Progress. He borrowed such books as he could, which were many for that time. He read them by the dim fire light at night. I said that he could not attend night school. I was wrong. He did attend night school. It was instituted and taught by Abraham Lincoln. He had long sessions of night school at home and at his friends' homes. He was a marvelous self instructing student.

Think of the many nights by a dim light he would read and ponder over his self-assigned lessons, not one night but many, many nights. Frequently his father thought that he should go to bed earlier, but his step mother would intercede for him. He broadened his vision and grew intellectually strong.

The heights of great men reached and kept,
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night

He never wasted any time. He was always improving his condition.

At Alford Grass's home he read far, far into the night. When the tallow dip gave out he would lay on the floor in front of the fire and he would read such books as were in Grass's library. We are assured that among them was Shakespeare. Grass's mother remarked

that it looked as he would bake his brains. She wondered, if he could stand to work the next day after having read so late. He was up early and at his task early and did his work with a will. Grass was a young college graduate, and it is very probable that he had quite a library of books that he had used in college. Lincoln boarded there and read those books at night. He probably read all of them.

Similar conditions prevailed at Allen Gentry's home when he was staying there.

C. G. Vanness is authority for the statement that Lincoln read and reread at the home of David Turnham, Sinbad the Sailor, Scott's Lessons in Elecution and the Revised Statutes of Indiana.

Dennis Hanks said that he read the Arabian Nights, the Life of Henry Clay and Henry Clay's speeches. He was a great admirer of Henry Clay.

Judge Kiper is authority for saying that Lincoln visited the home of Lawyer John A. Breckenridge in Boonville, Indiana, and read his books and studied law. The stump in the Breckenridge yard where Lincoln read quite a lot, was called the Lincoln Stump by the Breckenridge family. He would borrow books from Breckenridge and take them home and study them in his night school. It is also said that Lincoln read Shakespeare at Breckenridge's home.

We know that he must have read something on astronomy. Ann Robey reported that Lincoln told her before he made the flat boat trip from Rockport, that the sun did not rise in the east and travel to the west through the day. It just seemed as if it did. Instead the earth revolved around the sun every twenty four hours. No doubt but he had read and studied about those things in some of his friends' books.

We know that he associated with and conversed with the best minds of his community and possibly for a radius of many miles. We know the history of many of the people of Spencer and Warrick

Counties with whom, no doubt, he came in contact. If he did not know all of them by personal contact, he knew them through other friends. Some of those men were Judge Pitcher, Ratliff Boon, Lawyer John A. Breckenridge, Daniel Grass, Alford Grass, Josiah Crawford, Andred Crawford, John Proctor, Judge Graham, Judge DeBruler, Thomas Britton, John Morgan and John Greathouse. All of these men were highly educated. Most of them were college graduates, some from Harvard. Some of them were special friends of Abraham Lincoln from whom he borrowed books and from whom he gathered worlds of valuable information and untold inspiration. With such men he discussed problems of public interest. He got the views of different people on the questions of the day. He heard discussions of all sides of various questions and issues. He became well informed on all matters of public interest. I would not be surprised, if the facts were known, that some of those men did not desire conversation with Lincoln. Some of those friends had a special interest in Lincoln and gave him wholesome advice on many matters.

Besides the above list of men, he knew the Halls, the Lamars, the Grigsbys, the Turnhams, the Kellems, the Brooners, the Barkers, the Gentrys, the Huffmans, the Hammonds, the Jones' and many others that we do not know.

He had access to a few newspapers that came into Jones' store, which was also the post office. He read them and re-read them. Those papers carried articles of all the issues and problems that confronted the public. He many times would read the articles to those who were at the store when the papers came. He would comment on the questions at issue. No doubt, when he was in the homes of other people who were able to subscribe for papers, he had access to them. Through them he gained much valuable information.

Where did he get his polish? He got it from his mother, his step-mother; from Andrew Crawford's school, where he taught manners as well as the 3 R's; in visiting the fine refined families that he was privileged to visit. He absorbed that polish by contact and association.

He never swore. He never used tobacco in any form. He did not drink intoxicating liquors. He was always polite, mannerly and well behaved. He used good language. He practiced the use of such language as he read. He was comfortable in the presence of his friends. He was plain spoken, but logical and to the point. In his future years he was not handicapped by having to overcome a lot of bad habits. He did not have to learn new mannerism and new diction.

No phase of Lincoln's official life, no principle that he advocated, no official acts of his future administration but what were founded on his life, his learning, his experiences in Indiana. You can point to any one of his acts and you can trace its fundamental facts to his Indiana life.

There is one sad fact in many of the stories of the life and history of Abraham Lincoln. The fact is that too few people know and realize that Abraham Lincoln ever lived in Indiana. Not enough people know that for 14 years of that part of his life when the fundamental elements that entered into the life of the boy, were spent in Indiana, right in this Lincoln County.

He lived in this historic Lincoln County for 14 long years, one fourth of his entire life. He lived close to nature, close to God's creatures and to God's creations. He lived closed to the hearts, the souls, the lives, the hardships, the joys, the sorrows of those sturdy pioneers whose very lives became a part of his life.

It was during those 14 years that the principals of manhood were formed. It was in Indiana among those hardy, honest, liberty loving pioneers that Lincoln learned the lessons that moulded his

character that made him fit for the mighty manhood and statehood responsibilities that he was so unexpectedly approaching. Here in Southern Indiana he learned in the school of experience and by associating with men whose very word was the eternal truth, and who met hardships without flinching. It was in Indiana where he became thoroughly familiar with God's Holy Writ.

He read. He learned. He labored. He practiced. He broadened that mind, that soul, that heart, that made him grow into that super-human leader, the great guide, the great president that he was. It was at the conclusion of those 14 years that he reached his majority. It was during those 14 years that he visited Court at Rockport and Boonville and became inspired to become the great lawyer that he did. It was during those 14 years that he made the famous flat boat trip to New Orleans and visited the slave market that had such a profound influence on his future attitude toward the slave question. The Emancipation Proclamation, was probably, unconsciously determined. It was here he split rails, felled trees, built houses. It was here he had the most of his public schooling, less than a year in all. It was here that his sainted mother was laid to rest. It was here that he came under the influence of his wonderful step-mother. It was here that his only sister died and was laid to rest in the cemetery of the Old Pigeon Baptist Church. It was here he was fitted for the great work that was in store for him. It was here that the foundation was laid of a son of destiny, a marvel of all ages, an intellectual giant, a super-statesman, a soul unspotted, a son with all the human elements so mixed and so blended and so balanced that the world has recognized him as its foremost apostle of fairness, justice and civic righteousness.

Lincoln loved the Constitution of the U.S. He regarded the constitution as a binding obligation between the states. He had deep convictions on the constitution, and he believed that it meant what it said.

When he was borrowing books and attending his night school he read and re-read the Declaration of Independence. We are told that he memorized it. He practically memorized the Constitution of the U.S.A. He familiarized himself with the Ordinance of 1787, governing the Northwest Territory. He read and re-read the constitution of Indiana. He lived in the home of Daniel Grass who was a member of the Constitutional Convention, and he discussed it with him.

He loved the old flag, not because it was a cotton or silk rag with red and white stripes and white stars in a blue field. He loved it for that for which it stood. He regarded it as emblematical of all that made American citizenship worth while.

We are all Americans. Americans all! It is fine to be an American. It is fine to live in the traditions of Abraham Lincoln. It is fine to live in the Lincoln Country. It is fine to live under the protecting folds of Old Glory. Old Glory, Long may you wave O'er the land of the free and the home of the bravest of the brave. May your emblematical symbol impress itself so indelibly upon the mind and soul of every American citizen that he or she will fully realize your significance. May you not only wave over the land of this Government as such, but over the heart and home of every individual that makes up this great Commonwealth. Old Glory! One Country! One Flag! Freedom! Freedom for each and every individual. Old Glory, May you always stand for the freedom that was handed down by our founding fathers, that freedom that cost barrels and barrels of blood and thousands and thousands of lives to secure and much more to maintain.

Old Glory, some want to pull you down, and substitute for you, a conglomeration of idiocies, a mixture of the colors of Haile Selassie, the Hammer and Sickle, the Swastika, the emblem of China, India, Czechoslovakia, and a thousand others, which shall never contaminate your honored position. You are all that is left in this old world that stands for genuine freedom, where men can live and breathe the free air of humanity, where men have the right to think

freely and to express these thoughts to others and who can act to put those thoughts into expressions and manifestations of material things that go to increase the comforts of life and the standards of living. NO, NO! Never do we want those sacred folds dragged in the slime and filth of universal confusion, strife, and political debauchery. Not in a thousand years can any group or any people displace you with something better. May those stars shine brighter and continue to lead the world into a better way of thinking and into a better way of life. Wave on old flag, over this old Ship of State. And

Thou to sail on O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, Strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

When did humanity ever hang more breathlessly on thy fate than now?

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in - - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations of this confused and war-torn old world, that that nation of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth. May we as American Citizens prove faithful to the principals for which it has always stood.

Wave on Old Glory! Wave on, as Abraham Lincoln would have you wave.

